

ORATION

— BY —

HON. L. W. HALL,

DELIVERED

BEFORE THE POSTS OF THE G. A. R.,

IN THE

Opera House, Harrisburg. Pa.,

— ON —

— MAY 30, 1879. —

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*Soldiers of the Grand Army, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

The ways of preserving history are as numerous as the instances recorded. Before the invention of printing the history of the past was told in the ballads of the minstrels, who sang the noble deeds of warriors and the patriotic acts of statesmen. Homer's *Illiad* is a series of songs, embalming the deeds of brave dead who avenged the outrage of virtue. All nations have their typical modes of transferring from age to age the lustre of their past. The memory of patriotic dead has ever been equally cherished by civilized nations and savage tribes. The American, the youngest of all the nationalities, is not unlike other lands in the grateful reverence in which she holds the memory of her heroes, so that the ceremonies which we engage in to-day are but a repetition of those which mankind have accepted for ages to do honor to their dead. Thus, we cast flowers on the graves of our dead soldiers, not so much as an adornment—for the sun of day and the dew of night will wither these floral offerings, but as an emblem of a great cause—a reminder of a great principle, with which we thus identify ourselves. In this manner we renew our pledges of devotion to the Union and the government. The dead who die in battle are sacrifices for a living idea and give themselves to perpetuate some great principle. The dead who fill the graves which you are about to adorn with flowers, did not die as dumb brutes driven to the slaughter. They were men like you and I, in the full possession of their faculties, who volunteered at their country's call to put down domestic insurrection. When the first call for troops was made, the government had received a blow delivered by traitors, and the Union had been theoretically dissolved, by the passage

of ordinances of secession through conventions held in the several States of the South. The rebellion was organized before the government took the field, so that its first armed movement was in the spirit in which the Constitution declares the President shall invoke the war power—to repel domestic invasion. The war was not begun by the government to assert its power on the one hand, or enforce laws claimed to be obnoxious on the other. It was the stern necessity of self-defence alone that compelled the loyal authorities to act. Nothing less than a nation's life was at stake. For years the South had quietly nullified statute and repudiated organic law, at which the then government winked. But when that section began a war on the Union by claiming the power to break it up, and put armies into the field to carry this purpose into effect, it was war on the government, domestic insurrection—which the Constitution declares the President shall quell, and to this end the people were called upon to arm, that the national authority might be enforced. Was ever war undertaken by any government prompted by greater provocatives and impelled by nobler purposes? It was not a war for conquest—not a struggle for a dynasty. The combat was begun on the part of the rebels to destroy that, in the building up of which our fathers in the revolutionary period had pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. I deem it right, my countrymen, to impress these facts on your recollection, that you may the better discharge the duty of the day. You are not here merely to honor martial deeds—to venerate the sacrifice of brave soldiers who died in battle inspired by just ambition. You have assembled to place the rose and the lilly on the graves of volunteer soldiers—those you held most dear in life—who gave their very lives that the Union of American States should not only be perpetuated, but that the nation should be represented in a government strong enough to ensure republican institutions to the people of all the States, and at the same time powerful enough to enforce its own authority. It was this that inspired Mr. Lincoln in the call for the first troops, and which prompted every man who volunteered on the side of the government during the eventful years of the war. The nations of the world recognized this idea triumphant in the success of the Union arms. Every Union soldier who died, felt he gave his life to save the nation, and could they speak to us to-day, it would be to emphasize the prayer, that the government of the Union and the Union itself might not only live forever, but be recognized as *national*—all powerful—an emblem of authority.

Else they have died in vain!

It was the assertion of the right of a State to secede that caused the rebellion. This was claimed to be a reserved right, older than the Union, and not surrendered by admittance into it. As the South made this issue in the armed arbitrament which took place when rebellion was precipitated, is it now not fair to insist that the claim has been pronounced invalid? Thus we have settled by the war the nationality of the country, and the continued endurance of the Union. Such a triumph was worthy of the cost made to achieve it. Men did not fight on the side of the Union to give the government any other shape than that in which it came to them from the Revolutionary fathers. The National authority was defied in the act of Secession and the Union endangered in the rebellious war. If defeat of rebellion was the vindication of the power of the National government, then is the hour of triumph to be best perpetuated in recognizing that power. There can no authority arise in the States higher than the National government. Any attempt to ignore such authority is ineffectual treason. The war which crushed Rebellion has settled this question forever. The men whose graves you are to decorate made a great sacrifice, and we honor ourselves in honoring their memory to-day. But we must remember that this is something more than a mere funeral demonstration. We must make it signify a testimony of our unwavering determination to protect and uphold what they maintained and secured—the National Union and the National Government. If you do not mean this, you had better carry your flowers home again, and let them wither at the root of the stocks from which you plucked them.

Fourteen years—less than one-half of the average life of a single generation has passed since the end of the cruel war. History will tell how well Pennsylvania responded in the trying time. She sent to the conflict more than 400,000 of her sons. They left home and friends and the comforts of life for the hardships and dangers of camp. More than 50,000 were killed in battle or died from wounds and sickness. Thousands lie in unknown and unmarked graves.

Many sleep near where they fell, beneath a Southern sun, far from friends and relatives, among those who had no sympathy for them or their cause. The graves of these you cannot decorate. Yet they are not forgotten and ever will be held in grateful memory by the Republic.

“On fame’s eternal camping ground

“Their silent tents are spread,

“And glory guards with sacred round.

“The bivouac of the dead.”



This day has been appointed for the paying of honors to the memory of those who fell in the armed defence of our country, in the great rebellion. It is made by law a holiday, and an association of honorably discharged Union soldiers all through the land, in every State, in every county, town and township, engage in the sad but grateful duty of placing sweet flowers on the graves of known and unknown alike, that we may learn the lesson of the value of liberty, law and republican institutions. The Grand Army of the Republic seeks to honor the principles and institutions for which its members and their dead comrades fought. To keep green the memory of the latter, is to make stronger the devotion of those who live. The distinction between the man who fought for, and the man who fought against his country, must ever be kept up. The one was a patriot—the other was not. You strew flowers on the graves of the Union dead alone. This is not incompatible with the proper magnanimity of a victor. You hold malice to none—you have charity for all — but you cannot consent to obliterate the wide gulf which lies between the motives and principles for which you fought, and those contended for by your late enemy in arms. That they were brave, none will deny. But bravery, skill and endurance combined are no excuse for treason. The lesson to be perpetually taught by every recurring “decoration day,” is a vain and unmeaning one, if this distinction is not ever kept in mind. Those who were true to their country in the time of her greatest peril, have no apologies to make. For them the present is mixed with no regrets for the past. Standing by the patriot’s grave, let us firmly resolve “that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to the cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom; and that the government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Then, indeed, will these ceremonies mean something, and as time moves on our love of country will grow stronger and stronger, and our children and children’s children will venerate and love more and more those who died and fought for the life of the great Republic.

Decoration day! A day set apart by soldiers themselves as one annually to be observed throughout the whole loyal country in memory of and love for our fallen defenders. Beautiful and grand conception! This is the twelfth observance of it. How fitting the time! Every tree clothed in its brightest dress—while on every hand we have the springing flower and opening bud. Life is everywhere. Place flowers



on the grave of all alike—the titled officer and the private soldier. Bring the red rose and the white and delicate lilly—the blue-eyed violet—the brilliant pansy, the fragrant lilac and the jessamine—the dainty forget-me-not, and the heliotrope, and scatter them with loving hands over the sacred dust. The ground consecrated by their bodies

“Is hallowed down to earth’s profound  
And up to heaven.”

As each Spring time comes and goes, as the flowers are fresh and fragrant in all their beauty, may willing hands ever be found to thus keep green in memory our soldier dead.

We read in French history that the great Napoleon saw one of his famous body guard shot by his side on the field of Jena. Stooping over the dying man he asked what he could do to relieve his suffering. The brave Frenchman, with death’s rattle in his throat and sweat upon his brow, begged that his name should never be stricken from the roll of the old body guard, but that every roll call, morning and evening, a living comrade might respond to his name—“He fell at Jena.”

So let it be with our gallant dead. Never let a name be stricken from the muster roll of our memory, but at every roll call let the response come from every loyal heart, as to each who has gone before—“he fell in the great war for freedom—he died for his country.”

